

A wide-ranging, stimulating treatise on the why of war

The author examines history, philosophy and politics, but sides with biology as the motivation for human attainment by force.

War In Human Civilization
By Azar Gat
Oxford. 838 pp. \$35

Reviewed
by Nicholas Evan Sarantakos

Why war? That basic question is what Azar Gat, a professor at Tel Aviv University and a major in the Israeli Army reserve, tackles in this hefty book.

Prussian general Karl von Clausewitz saw war as a function of politics. John Keegan, the British historian/journalist, argues that war is a manifestation of culture. Gat disagrees with both. He believes war is a function of biology. Fighting is ingrained in our DNA.

To use Gat's own words: "Thus, as this book claims, fundamentally wars have been fought for the attainment of the same objects of human desire that underlie the human motivational system — *only by violent means,*



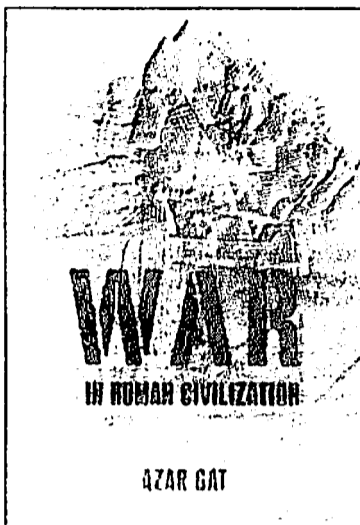
Author Azar Gat

through the use of force" (emphasis in the original).

Books of this nature, ones that address such a huge issue, are not that common. Paul Kennedy got a lot of attention in the late 1980s with *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. James McPherson also generated a lot of interest in the U.S. Civil War with *Battle Cry Freedom*. Both were serious academic works that addressed big issues in which the public had a lot of interest. Gat, though, tackles even bigger figures — Sir Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The book takes an extremely broad look at human civilization — hence its title. Gat draws upon biology, anthropology, sociology, archaeology, international relations, history, and animal behavior. His book is an intellectual tour de force and also exceptionally well-written. True, it is a marathon to read the thing, but if you know what you are getting into, it is very stimulating.

The last third of the book — a book in and of itself — is something I wish anyone in Washington involved with national security would read. Gat argues that efforts to promote democracy will do little to bring about peace and stability. In fact, there is good evidence that democracies are more belligerent than other forms of government. According to Gat, "contrary to the Enlightenment's view that the differential distribution of benefits and risks was the factor that made the decision to go to war easy, it was the more egalitarian-participatory societies that proved the most formidable in mobilizing for and sustaining war — defensive and offensive — as both egalitarian tribal



From the book jacket

societies and republican city-states demonstrated."

What appears to really be reducing the frequency of war is the fact that humans more and more have the ability to meet their basic needs and even their advanced wants. Gat draws upon a good many zoological and biological studies to show how other species fight among themselves to control basic needs such as access to food and contact with members of the opposite sex. He argues that similar factors have been at work in motivating soldiers' willingness to fight. A recent DNA-driven study found that Genghis Khan's sexual rampages made him an ancestor of about 0.5 percent of the world's male population and shows that there is something to this view. Economic advancement, then, is a major factor in bringing about tranquility. Gat is careful, though, to point out that it is no magic bullet and that war has sometimes been a major mechanism for economic growth.

I have reservations about his biological-determinist explanations. A similar argument has been offered for obesity: People are overweight because they have some sort of "fat gene." Well, maybe. Or maybe it's because they eat food high in calories. The point is that humans are not like other animal species, and DNA can go only so far in explaining the motivation underlying human behavior. Biological determinism is an excuse that absolves people of responsibility. Basic animal instinct can and does motivate human behavior, but it can be taken only so far as an explanation of it.

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